

“Celebrate With Me”

Luke 15: 1-10

I struggled with this sermon this week. Not because this text is an especially hard text for us to deal with as people of faith. In fact, it is one of the easier ones for us to follow. When we read it, we can relate to it. We get the concept of being lost because at one point or another during our lives, we have been lost or have lost something important. Every single one of us has stories about being lost, stories about how one time, we lost our car keys and of course we were running late. So we started searching for them and guess where we found them. In the refrigerator of all place. Now this is usually followed up with the statement, “I don’t know how they got there but there they were!” We’ve all got stories like that.

Or maybe we’ve got stories about how our kids wandered away from us and got lost in store and we heard, “Would the parent of so and so, please come to the customer service desk? We found your son” My mom always hated those. She used to threaten me that she was going to strap a bicycle flag, you know that thing with the long pole and the flag at the top so she could keep track of me in stores just because the customer service people all knew me by name.

Sure, maybe we’ve all got stories like that.

Or maybe we've got stories about how we lost an important paper. You know the ones, "I put it in a safe place and now I can't remember where that safe place is". So we started searching and searching until we found it. Then we all took a huge sigh of relief partly because we found it and partly because we could now say, "I knew I wasn't crazy. It was right where I left it."

Yeah, we've all got stories like these. That's why this text isn't really hard for us to understand. We know what it is like to be lost. That's nothing new to us. In fact, let's be honest, we know that's why Jesus used the idea of being lost in his story. He knew people would be able to relate to losing stuff and then finding them once again. People lose stuff all the time so what better teaching moment than to use something everyone could relate to while teaching them about God.

So this whole being lost; this whole being found-they are all things we can understand. That's one of the reasons we love hearing these parables so much. For once, in telling them, Jesus is speaking our language. He is not saying something crazy like "Blessed be the peacemakers" or telling us that we need to give away all our possessions, take up our cross, and follow him"

However, just a side note, if you do decide this week, that you do want to give up all your possessions, take up your cross, and follow Jesus, the church rummage sale is happening on Saturday and I'm sure the women would love to have your stuff!"

Now back to this whole being lost and Jesus not talking crazy thing- we can relate. Heck, we even like this Jesus. He is speaking our language. We get it.

“Once I was lost, now I am found.” Let’s all sing “Amazing Grace” and break for communion.

Except...Except...well, if we take a closer look at these parables, we see that there is more to them than just us being lost and then us being found again. We realize that yes, once again, Jesus is talking crazy and yes, once again, Jesus is upsetting the status quo. And yes, whether we like it or not, once again, Jesus is asking us to come out of our comfort zones and do something really challenging, something we’d like to pretend isn’t a part of being a follower of Jesus Christ.

When we take a look at the very first line of our Scripture, we realize that Jesus is up to his old tricks again and the grumbling has started. Or should I say, the grumbings of the powers that be continue to get louder. This time, the grumbings are happening because Jesus is eating with the tax collectors and sinners. And It is not that he just happens to be at the same house as these people.

No, Jesus is hosting them. Jesus is welcoming them. Jesus is accepting these tax collectors and sinners as brothers and sisters, seeing them as made in the image of God.

Now, let me stop right there and say that yes, even at this point in the story, we still like this Jesus. We can get behind what he is doing. It is very Disciple of

him to welcome all to the table but he is starting to lose us a little as the story continues. Like I said, it is not because of what he is doing, we totally agree with that but we get a little lost, pardon the pun, due to this whole sinner talk. We can't and don't really relate to this type of talk and if truth be told, sin is not something we really like to think about any way as people of faith.

Sure, we know that there are sinners. And if pressed hard enough, we would all probably begrudgingly admit that we fall somewhere in that "sinner" category. Sure, We know that there are times that we fall short of who God calls us to be. But would we call ourselves "sinners"?

We are not bad people. We aren't doing hurtful and hateful things each day. But yeah, I guess, if we have to admit it, we do fall short now and again. But what does this mean for us and how we should hear this story? Is Jesus really telling us that we are really on the outside, lost, when all along we thought we were on the inside, found? Is Jesus telling us that instead of being a story for someone else worse off than us, this story is supposed to be for us as well. Our ears perk up a little bit and we take another look at these oh so familiar stories once again, wanting to know what Jesus is saying to us.

What if this story is really more what we thought it was. What if it is more than me being lost and then me being found? What if it is more about our relationship with each other as brothers and sisters in Christ. What if it is more

about how we respond to welcoming others home. We'll never know until we let the story speak to us as it was written.

So let's try something. What if we changed the wording a bit and instead of "sin" we say that Jesus welcomed those who were not in harmony with their Creator, not in harmony with creation, not in harmony with all of our brothers and sisters?

Now that opens the door a bit! That puts a whole new spin on this parable because all of a sudden, we can see ourselves in this story. We see that like those tax collectors and sinners, we too are also desperately wanting Jesus to welcome us to his table. We too are also desperately wanting Jesus to embrace us as his own. Now We can see ourselves in this story, and we too are wondering when that invitation will be extended to us. It is no longer just us and them. It is about all of us as a community, whole and complete.

What we discover as we read on is that by telling these parables Jesus is really giving us hope and extending a challenge to us.. He is telling us that he knows we fall short every now and again but so do others and we should extend them the same grace that God extended to us. He also wants us to know that the search really isn't about us as individuals and our own need to be found by God. The search is more about our relationship with God, more about our relationship with one another as a whole community. The search is more about our willingness

to accept the love of God and extend it to others. The search is more about being embraced by God and embracing others as God embraced us. Sure God searched for us but God wasn't done after that. God's search won't be over until every single one of God's children is home.

Because that's when the real celebration can start!

You see, These parables are so much more than just us being lost and then found as individuals. They are so much bigger than the times we fall short. These parables are so much bigger than us as individuals and our own needs. They are really about coming together as a whole community.

Yes, they are about Joy. Yes, They are about Celebration. Yes, they are about God's joy in finding us, our joy in being found. But there is more joy, more celebration to be had when we realize that God is are satisfied with just finding one. These parables remind us that at the very heart of our faith, we are called yes, to be in relationship with God but also with our brothers and sisters. We are called to be in relationship with the people we like and the people we don't like. We are called to be in relationship with the people we get along with perfectly and the ones that drive us up the wall. We are called to be in relationship with all of God's children. Because here's the kicker. Our joy, our celebration at being home isn't complete, it can't be fully realized until we are all made whole, until even single one of God's children finds his or her way back home and experiences the love and

grace of God. The celebration can't really get started until everyone is back home, safe and secure, one complete community.

And the thing we need to remember is God is willing to risk it all until that moment happens. that's how much God loves us. The Kingdom of God is too important for God not to take these risks and go out searching for the one, or two, or thousands until we are complete once more.

That's what we miss each and every time we hear these parables. We assume that because we know all about being lost than that's all there is to the story. But there is so much more. There is more joy to be had There is more of celebrating to happen. All because God first extended the invitation to us and now it is our turn to share that joy. It is our turn To celebrate the gift that we know –that God will search for us, all of us, no matter how many times we roam until the Body of Christ is made whole once more, until the Body of Christ is complete once more and the celebration can truly get started.

And we miss it all just because we assume that these parables are just about being lost. We miss the bigger celebration because we assume these stories don't speak to us. We are sitting right here in the pews, what else do we need?. We miss the bigger invitation because we assume that because we are already here, the celebration can already get started.

As we read these parables we realize that that is just not the case. God says the search isn't over. God is still looking for lost sheep. God is still looking for lost coins. And the search is going to continue, until every single one of God's children is back home. Then the real party can start. Then the true joy will be complete.

We need to realize that Jesus knew what he was doing when he started talking about sheep and coins. We just cut him off before he could finish the rest of the story. These stories aren't just about you and me. These stories are about making us whole as a community, one Body.

Yes Jesus uses everyday ordinary objects like sheep and coins because, people could relate to them, and yes, during that time, maybe people had one or the other get lost and they had stories to tell about their experiences in finding those objects.. But he uses these items for other reasons as well. Sheep and coins can't sin. Sheep and coins can't repent. So we need to stop making these stories about something they are not. They are not just about us and individuals. They are about the whole community of God.

Jesus wasn't telling us these parables to try to change how we behave or to get us to turn back to God. He wants us to understand that there is more to this welcome, this invitation, this celebration than we originally thought. It is not just that one sheep was returned. It is not just that one coin was found. The joy and the

celebration comes from the fact that the missing piece was found and now the set is complete. These parables are not about our actions. They are about God's.

If we take a closer look, we realize that the sheep and the coins do nothing in these stories. The Shepherd and the Woman do all the work. They do all the searching. They do all the looking. It is the shepherd and the woman who take the initiative and begin the frantic search for the lost objects.

The sheep doesn't just show up and say "Here I am" and the coin doesn't pop up and say-I've been under the couch this whole time. No, the Shepherd goes out and looks in caves, checks the watering holes, peers down into the dark pit, looking for that one sheep. And the woman does all the heavy lifting, moving furniture, sweeping out the dust bunnies, throwing out the rummage, just to find that one coin. They could have easily cut their losses and moved on. But the set would have always been incomplete. The whole would have been weakened. So they look and look until finally the set is made whole.

And when they do find the missing objects, they celebrate. They throw the biggest and best party. All because what was 99 is now 100. All because what was 9 is now 10. you see, their joy comes not because just one object was found. Their search is more than that. Their search is about wholeness. Their search is about reconciliation. Their search is about bringing the missing link to make the chain

stronger. Their search is about making the whole picture complete. And the same is true for God in God's search.

God knows, that until every single one of God's children is back home, the celebration can't really begin. God knows, that until every single one of God's children is connected and a part of the Kingdom of God, experience all the love, all the grace, all the peace, all the joy, then the party can't really begin.

These parables are really about God's joy in finding us, yes as individuals but also as making the Body of Christ whole once more. God knows and we know something wonderful, something life-transforming, something amazing. We know that with each child of God that is welcomed home, we are one step closer to realizing the Kingdom of God here on earth, a kingdom where all are welcome, where all are loved, where all are seen made in the image of God, where all are celebrating and joyful.

And that is the lesson and challenge for us today and all days. We simply cannot be content that we have been found. Others are still lost. Others are still hurting. Others are still needing to hear about God's amazing grace and love. The party is really no fun until everyone gets invited to come. The true joy and celebration can't start until everyone is welcomed to the table.

God is still looking and so should we. We should be inviting. We should be sharing the joy. We should be extending the welcome.

It is simply not enough to say that I was once lost and now I am found. We must say, we won't rest until all are found. We won't rest until all are welcome to the table.

May we continue the search until all can say come celebrate with me. Amen.